



Have a Plan

by Maj Mark C. Murphy, Pope AFB, N.C.
Photo by: A1C Austin Knox

One of the advantages of growing up on a hog farm is that education comes quickly and lessons have a way of staying with you forever. The following is absolutely true.

One blustery spring day when I was about 12, my father asked my brother and me to take the manure spreader out and unload it on the fields. The manure spreader is a big wagon pulled behind a tractor. As you drive, a powered conveyor system pushes the wagon's contents into steel beaters that spin rapidly, throwing wet, sloppy pig waste high in a big brown fan shape in every direction behind you.

You can spray half a ton of the stuff in about 2 minutes. When you're a 12-year-old guy, this mechanical marvel represents the pinnacle of engineering achievement.

On this particular day, my brother drove the tractor and I sat on the fender next to him. Our load had been fermenting in a pile behind the barn for about 2 months. All went well on the first pass across the field, although the 30-knot headwind made us squint a bit. We reached the end of the field, cut power to the spreader, kicked the left brake, spun the tractor around 180 degrees, lined up for a return pass and turned the power back on.

Did I mention the headwind? At this point it became a tailwind. We were instantly engulfed in a slimy brown monsoon. We panicked.

My brother's first instinct was to kick in the clutch, which simply stopped us from moving forward and made things worse. He quickly realized his mistake and made another by letting it go with a lurch, sending us careening wildly across the field because steering was now low on the priority list.

Arms and legs thrashed everywhere as we both fought each other for the controls, trying to shield our eyes and bumping heads while fumbling for the

now-slippery power take-off lever between the pedals. Opening one's mouth to speak was out of the question. By the time we got things shut off, we were full, and the spreader was empty.

Mom made us strip down on the porch. Dad eventually quit laughing and made us wash the tractor.

That was the day I learned a valuable lesson about personal risk management. My brother and I hadn't properly assessed the situation ahead of time or considered the possibility of anything going wrong. Had we done so, we might have driven a different path that didn't put the wind behind us, worked

out emergency procedures to delegate tasks and prepare for rapid shutdown, spent more time becoming proficient with the tractor's controls and worn rain gear.

Instead, we smugly headed for disaster, confident in our abilities and worry-free because nothing had ever gone wrong before.

So far in fiscal year 2004, Air Combat Command has lost 16 of its members to mishaps. Most of those could have been prevented if people had applied PRM principles and thought things through before proceeding. People don't wrap cars around trees because they think they're

poor drivers; they do it because they think they have everything under control and find out too late that they don't.

My father didn't call it Personal Risk Management, but he summed it up simply: What is the cost of being wrong? Take a look at the whole picture when you're doing something risky, and consider the cost if something unforeseen happens or you're not as good as you think you are.

If you're not willing to pay that bill, look for ways to do it smarter so the cost decreases. Take it from me: Sometimes the benefit isn't worth the risk. ✦